



# News Release

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## **Tobacco sales to minors at highest level in the last decade**

*About 16 percent of tobacco retailers illegally sold to minors in 2012*

**OLYMPIA** – The number of Washington retailers illegally selling tobacco to minors has risen to its highest level in more than a decade. An annual report that tracks illegal sales shows about 16 percent of tobacco retailers in our state sold tobacco to minors from January to June of this year — up from 11 percent in 2011 and 10 percent in 2010.

“This is unacceptable. Our young people should not have access to these deadly tobacco products,” said Secretary of Health Mary Selecky. “Most adult smokers start as teens, so if we can keep tobacco out of the hands of kids, it’s likely they’ll never take up this dangerous habit.”

The Department of Health works with state and local agencies to train tobacco retailers so they know and understand their obligations under the law and the penalties for violating it. The high level of employee turnover in stores that sell tobacco makes retailer education crucial. With limited budgets over the last few years, local communities were unable to expand retailer education or dedicate resources to youth prevention. Meanwhile, the tobacco industry continues to invest huge amounts of money to attract new smokers. In 2010, the industry spent about \$80 million on marketing activities in Washington alone.

The current youth smoking rate in Washington is about 13 percent. It’s dropped by about half since 2000. Unfortunately the rate of decline has leveled off in recent years, and the use of alternative tobacco products like chew, cigars, and hookahs is a growing concern.

The rate of stores selling tobacco to minors is monitored in the annual Synar Report. The report is the result of federal legislation that requires states to enact and enforce laws that prohibit the sale of tobacco products to minors, and to conduct annual random, unannounced inspections of retailers. The report is compiled by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Compliance checks are conducted by local health agencies and the state Liquor Control Board. Working with local law enforcement, teens try to buy cigarettes and other tobacco products at randomly selected retailers. Clerks who sell tobacco to minors can be fined up to \$100 and retail owners can be fined up to \$1,500. Licenses to sell tobacco are permanently revoked after multiple violations.

If the rate of retailers selling tobacco to minors exceeds 20 percent, Washington could lose nearly \$14 million dollars in federal funding for drug, alcohol, and tobacco prevention and treatment. While official youth checks determine the rate of illegal sales, anyone can report a violation on the state [Liquor Control Board's website](#).

Washington has made significant headway in lowering smoking rates, but there's still work to do. Statewide there are about 70,000 youth who still smoke cigarettes. About 50 young people start smoking each day and about 7,900 people die every year in Washington from tobacco-related diseases. Making sure stores don't sell tobacco to children helps kids remain free from addiction, disease, and death caused by smoking.

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